

## **Back Again, Back Again: Teeth and Claws**

Trigger Warning: This episode contains descriptions of violence, blood, and background character deaths.

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

**Abigail, as the intro:** Back Again, Back Again, episode eight: teeth and claws.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

**Ilyaas:** That day's dawn didn't come with a knock on my door and a call to training, Cassian's promise of learning more than I had the day before. Rhia and I slept past sunrise -- until nearly midday -- and I instead found myself, half-awake, squinting into the golden glow of sunlight through the curtains, as Rhia sat, cross-legged, at our desk, humming, transfixed on her embroidery. There was fifteen seconds of total peace -- of brain fog and her haunting lover's song and the golden warmth of the sun on my face -- before I remembered the day and what it held.

I didn't stay in bed long. Instead, I began to prepare for battle.

Cassian waited outside my door again, and I stepped out, leggings and shirt, my box of armor under one arm, my stomach roiling with malicious intent. Nervous energy pulled his stride longer than mine as we walked, where he was usually so careful

to match his pace to the person he was walking with. He fiddled with the straps of his armor, his sword at his waist -- his armor was already on, of course, that was Cassian: always prepared, his form of defense against his anxieties.

We found ourselves in the arena -- a place we didn't frequent together for the noise and the sheer amount of soldiers that were housed and trained around it. The floor was sandy and the walls were tall on three sides -- the fourth opening to a gate, where woods raged on the other side. Sound echoed through the place, horses and soldiers amplifying their noise so much that a company became an army. It was chaos -- these thirty-something soldiers Cassian had selected, all far removed from me, all looking to the two of us in the entryway, waiting for time to start, for an order to be given. This was why the *Enarbol* was preferable. We were alone at the *Enarbol*, just Cassian and the tree and I. No one could see how incompetent their eligida was by the *Enarbol*.

I put on my armor -- laced on my bracers, put on my breastplate and shoulder guards and heavy leather boots, -- and watched as, from a pocket, Cassian pulled a tiny jar of golden paint.

He dipped two fingers into it, motioning to me. *So they know*, he murmured, and smiled crookedly. *So when you ride they see the magic on your face and know the day has come.*

I felt my stomach churn, because he and I both knew my magic was unreachable. For as much as I felt it in my blood, there was no way I could pull it out and into my hands beyond a faint glow in my sword -- Cassian was convinced I would find my way when I needed it. I was much less certain.

But I let him streak the paint on my face, a battle cry in itself, and then I matched it on him -- two fingers into the jar, two lines down his left cheek and across the right side of

his forehead -- *now we match*, I told him, screwing the lid back onto the jar, and he grinned.

*A soldier and a king.*

*A soldier and a king*, I repeated, and went to pull my hair back.

*Leave it down*, he said, grabbing my hand with the leather band still clutched in it. My face flushed -- I'll admit it, because this was so different than the game of painting another's face. *Let them know who you are*. He took the strap and tied it around his wrist, tucking it underneath his bracers.

I shook off the burning in my ears and pretended I hadn't noticed at all. *Go greet your soldiers, king*.

*You first*, he said, and changed from the boy I knew into the princeling-warrior. *Ready?* He said. *Your first battle*.

I was not ready. I had magic in my veins and a sword at my side that told me I was the child of a prophecy, but I did not want to kill anyone and was pretty sure they would kill me before I could ever get the chance. If I was dead, I didn't know if that meant the magic would fall back asleep or this would be some Whoever Picks Up The Sword Continues The Line shit, but I didn't see it going very well.

I nodded, fake-saluted in a way that made him drop his airs just for a moment to laugh. *As ready as I can be, king*.

He went to greet his soldiers. I hung back, along the wall where we'd stood, as his voice boomed and they gathered around him, as the plans for attack rang out in Rhysean and the soldiers responded with excitement and trust and nervous energy -- but surety. They knew their path, and they were not afraid of where it led.

Cassian turned, then, and swept one hand out to me. Thirty pairs of eyes locked onto me, and his words were lost underneath the weight of their stares. But I knew the message: *this is the*

*Vatakina Elegida. She stands with us, and thus we will bring this tyrant low.*

We rode out. My horse didn't like me much, I could tell, and the fact that I had little idea of how to ride one only made our tentative connection more fragile. I rode beside Cassian all the same, our company behind us, silent but for the fall of hooves and sounds of the road. We took a path through the woods and soon found ourselves at the village where the resident soldiers had sent for us. The people had heard us coming -- or had been made aware of our coming -- and were out, lining the roads, as we marched in.

The villagers had a similar reaction to the woman who gave me her coat, the first day I arrived -- they couldn't seem to believe I was real. Cassian and I dismounted and talked with the old woman and her wife who helped run the village, who blanched -- I had assumed in fear -- when we told them we'd gotten word of the rebel group nearby. I say we. Cassian did all of the talking, as neither of them knew my English, and I didn't know a helpful amount of their Rhysean. I'd learned, at this point, the words for *rebel* and *sword* and whatever else Cassian had thought would be useful to me today, but the rest of their conversation -- I hadn't a clue.

They exchanged a look -- the sort of thing that comes after a lifetime of loving each other -- and the old woman's wife pointed us west -- just past the village, which sat at the corner of the Vast Wood and the small cities surrounding it.

Cassian relayed this information to his soldiers, and ordered their dismount -- horses are a liability in the thick parts of the wood, too much risk for the high ground they give. It was as he did this that the old woman grabbed my free hand -- the one not wrapped in my reluctant horse's reins -- and whispered in Rhysean that I held onto in my head -- that I

remembered for years until I knew what it meant, for the way she said it made my throat catch --

*Vatakina Eligida, prosperanil traem.*

Translated for intention, it means *prophecy child, aim true*.

I froze, there, this one hand gripped in a woman's who suddenly seemed a lot less strange to me, and my hand began to glow the green-gold of magic. She gasped, the slightest inhale of breath, as if she, too, could feel the way the world sharpened around us -- then quieted, suddenly, a bit more in tune than before.

As we stared at each other, I realized gold now flickered in her midnight eyes.

And then, as she took her hand from mine, her hand glowed, just the slightest bit, in green-gold, and it was my turn to suck in a breath.

She had -- magic.

*Gratinoc*, she whispered, the idea of the word, and -- somehow it all made sense. Whatever dregs of magic had lived in her all these years -- somehow -- I'd woken them up with a touch.

She made the sign the woman had made, on the first day I came -- the one that means a lot of things. *Shoulder-shoulder-out*, fingers crossed like a broken promise. I startled, at the time, more trying to recall where I'd seen it before than shocked at her action, but I lifted my own fist to my chest and made the gesture back at her.

She smiled and melted back into the crowd just as Cassian reappeared at my side.

*Are you alright?* He asked me, for I was open-mouthed and gaping like a fool.

Seeing him, my wonder fled and I was starkly reminded of the battle ahead.

At my lack of preparation and high probability of death. Yeah, I said, shoveling fear back down my throat. And then -- *I think I just gave magic away.*

His eyes snapped to mine, panic lighting them for just a minute. You -- *what?*

*Not all of it,* I hastily corrected, *just -- a little. And I feel -- better. Now.*

*To whom?* He asked, but I couldn't see the old woman any longer in the crowd, so I shrugged. *Don't do it again,* he snapped, then caught himself as I flinched. He apologized and corrected himself. *Not until we know what it means.*

*I think I know what it means,* I wanted to say, but kept my mouth shut as Cassian called a command and the soldiers stepped forward, us along with them, as we took the final part of our march west. I wrapped my horse's reins tighter around my knuckles.

We reached the woods. They were deathly silent, the town behind us having faded to the vaguest idea of what-was, and the trees rustling overhead only emphasized the stillness.

But there was force to it. There's weight to the minutes before violence, a tugging at your heart and head that tells you *something's coming. Something's coming.*

We left our horses at the edge of the clearing and, at Cassian's signal, drew our swords.

*Something's coming. Something's coming,* tugging at the not-right silence. I tried to keep my breathing quiet, tried to keep it a steady in-out as I realized more and more by the second how woefully underprepared I was.

How do you describe a battle? There was silence, and then suddenly there wasn't; rebels dropped down from the trees and

came out from their hiding spots and met Cassian's soldiers and Cassian and I -- I was supposed to stay by his side, to make I didn't die, to make sure I didn't get hurt -- but in the surging of people and the rush of *bloodshed* I found myself alone from him, my eyes darting wildly about as I tried to find the center I'd had drilled into me .

A girl my age, brown-haired and pale-skinned, met me, her sword flashing out and rage in her eyes. She knew who I was, what my hair meant, what the sword I carried said. I barely managed to block her first strike, the force of it nearly jolting the blade from my hands, and the second one, aimed at my face, wasn't caught in time before it cut open my cheek as I flailed wildly back.

I couldn't tell you what all I was thinking. Probably *holy shit I'm going to die*. Probably *find your center, find center, you'll be okay if you find center*.

I did not find center in time, and the pommel of the girl's sword smashed into my side. I staggered, briefly, and dropped like a log -- following which she raised her sword up and drove it deep into my shoulder.

I screamed.

Things you can guess about being stabbed: it hurts.

Things you don't think about, before being stabbed: You can feel your skin popping under the pressure and then your muscle tearing, and the blinding-hot pain doesn't stop you from feeling it as it draws back out, either, and that part's worse, because now all the pain receptors in your arm are alive.

The pain -- between the pounding of my head and my shoulder, screaming -- and my screaming, probably, too -- I did not get stabbed with grace like a movie hero, I cried about it like a baby and did not get back up -- the pain made the next parts blurry. I remember her snarling something in Rhysean, but

I couldn't even guess at what it was. I remember her raising up her sword again, and the thought, sudden and frightening in my mind, that this was where I would die, before Cassian was there and slammed into the girl, the two of them stumbling away and beginning to trade blows, swords matching, both of them moving with a speed that I hadn't thought possible.

I screamed again, I think, because this was the most pain I'd ever been in, my blood burning as it left -- and the sword called out to it, and magic thrummed in me, so sudden and fierce. I remember lifting my other hand, now coated in my own blood, towards the girl and --

She disappeared. Just -- *popped* right out of existence, what once was now no more.

I still don't know where she went. I hope somewhere safe. I tried to bring her back, but I wasn't sure how to do that. I never figured out how to send anything else away -- I tried with a bunch of objects, with a mouse once too. I don't know if it was the pain or the battle or the fact that Cassian was trying to kill her and I still did not want that to happen that made her wink out existence but... there she went.

Cassian had been raising his sword to block her blow, braced for a wound that never came, and he looked to me then, awe and fear and wonder staining his face before he met the next rebel in front of him, two swings before he put his sword through the man's chest.

That was the first time I watched someone die. It was not the last.

The battle didn't last much longer than that. Soon the rebels were all dead or gone and I was still unsuccessfully trying not to cry as Cassian raised his sword and his soldiers cheered and I was still trying not to curse as Cassian helped me up and one of the soldiers turned to him and asked *what should*



*we do with all of this*, his Rhysean slow enough that I understood.

*Burn it*, came Cassian's response.

*The bodies, too?*

His face hardened. *Them along with the rest.*

I sat to the side as they pulled their own dead from the lot and stacked the bodies just outside the edge of the wood, in the clearing between the village and the place blood had been shed. Even I could see the message in it, hard and unshakeable, for those in the village, for all those the story would reach: *this is what happens to those who defy kings.*

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

**Abigail, as the outro:** Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role no one else can fill. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.